

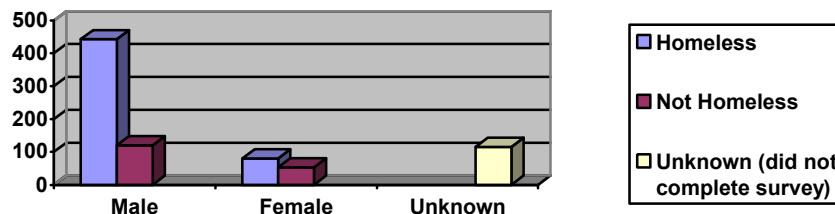
**OFFICE FOR WOMEN  
PROJECT HOMELESS CONNECT  
WOMEN WHO SOUGHT SERVICES**



On October 22, 2008, the Office for Women participated in the Project Homeless Connect Event organized by the Veterans Administration, Metro Housing and the Coalition for the Homeless. These agencies provided an opportunity for the homeless to receive needed food, clothing, medical care, social and psychological counseling. OFW participated in this event in an effort to make connections with homeless women in our community and to better understand the barriers they face. Interviews were conducted with 34 women<sup>1</sup>.

From an event report received by the Coalition 813 people sought services, but only 697 people completed the intake survey that day. Of those who completed the intake survey, 523 (75%) were considered homeless by HUD's definition – living on the streets or in shelters. Of those officially considered homeless, 15% (80) were women. **Chart 1** represents the breakdown of the numbers received from the Coalition.

**Chart 1: Total Participant Status by Gender**



The Coalition also reported a total of 133 women passing through those doors seeking assistance that day. Of those, 60% met the definition of homeless. Nationally 84% of homeless families are female-headed.<sup>2</sup> The remaining 40% (53) did not meet the definition and were not included in their event summary information. Where applicable, information from both of those groups will be provided for comparison purposes in the OFW detail below.

### **OFW Interview Data**

As stated above, the purpose of OFW participating in the Project Homeless Connect event was to learn more about the barriers and frustrations homeless women in our community face. Interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis and involved a series of nine questions with a total of 34 women (26% of the female population in attendance<sup>3</sup>) during the event. Of those, 71% met the federal definition for homeless. An analysis of the data collected by OFW follows:

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<sup>1</sup> As a community project, the UofL Sociology Student Association collected gloves to be distributed to women and their children during the event. These gloves provided a way to connect with the women, putting them at ease and allowing them to sit and talk with us for a few minutes.

<sup>2</sup> Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, 2007

<sup>3</sup> It is unknown if all of the 34 women we interviewed completed the intake survey.

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**Do you have children?**

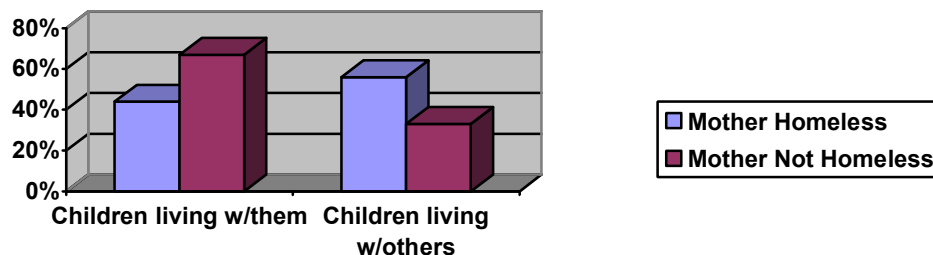
Research tells us that children account for more than a third of the homeless population<sup>4</sup> and that families headed by single mothers are the fastest growing group. During our interviews, women were asked if they had children. **Chart 2** shows that 75% of the homeless women had children under 18 resulting in an average of 2.9 children per mother. Another 21% indicated that their children were grown and staying elsewhere.

**Chart 2: Percentage of Women With and Without Children**



**Chart 3** represents the interviewees who reported having children under the age of 18. Research shows that a significant percentage of homeless families experience temporary or permanent separation of a child<sup>5</sup>. OFW data indicates that the children of most homeless mothers (56%) were not living with the mother. Twenty-three children (38%) were living with mothers in shelters.

**Chart 3: Percentage of Mothers with Children Under 18 by Homeless Status**

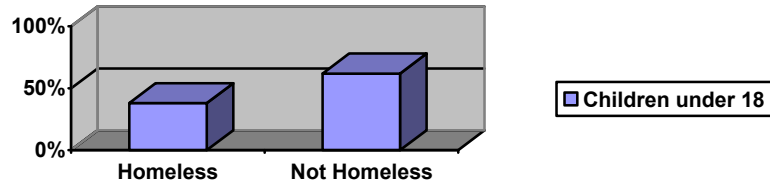


When we look at just the children (**Chart 4**), regardless of the mother's status, we find that 62% of the children of the women who were interviewed were currently living in a more stable environment compared to the women themselves (29%).

<sup>4</sup> National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2004

<sup>5</sup> Mother-Child Separations Among Homeless and Housed Families Receiving Public Assistance in New York City, 2002; Cowal, Shinn, Weitzman, Stojanovic and Labay.

**Chart 4: Percentage of Children Homeless v. Not Homeless**

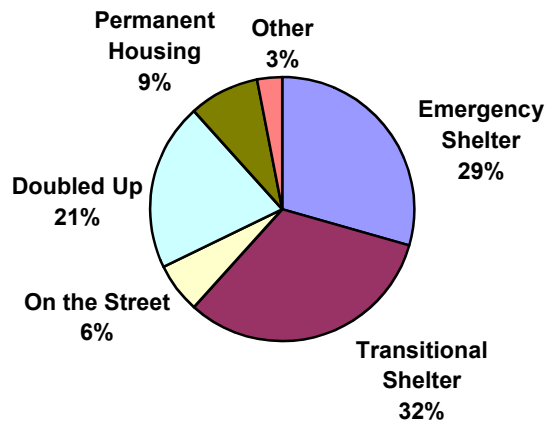


### Where are you staying now?

The women interviewed were asked about their currently living situation. In the data received from the Coalition, the majority (58%) of the general population served that day was living in either emergency or transitional shelters. This is in alignment with the information received by OFW – 61% of the women interviewed were living in emergency or transitional shelters.

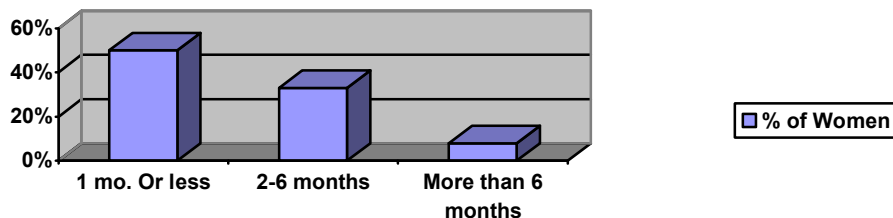
**Chart 5** represents the responses received by OFW:

**Chart 5: Current Living Situation**



Although the question was not asked directly by OFW, many women (35%) shared how long they had been living in their current situation. For those who shared the information, 92% had been in their current living situation 6 months or less. When we break it down further we see in **Graph 6** that more women had been in their current living situation one month or less.

**Chart 6: Length of Time in Current Living Arrangement**



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**Do you feel safe there?**

Over all, the majority (76%) of those interviewed indicated that they feel safe where they are currently staying. Those who reported that they did not feel safe shared that drugs, violence and other criminal activity were the reasons. From the housing status perspective, the women who were homeless felt safer (79%) in their current living arrangement than those who were not homeless (43%) as indicated in **Graph 7**.

**Chart 7: Feeling Safe by Housing Status**



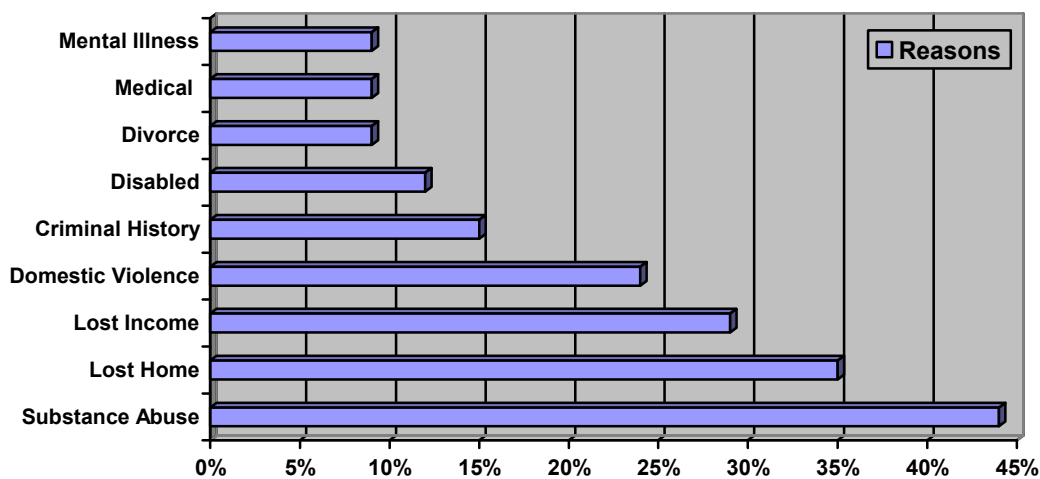
**What do you think was the main reason you became homeless?**

This was an open-ended question where the women were allowed to tell us in their own words the main reason for their homelessness. Half of them provided multiple reasons for their situation. The top four reasons listed for their cause of homelessness were:

- 44% substance abuse
- 35% lost home/evicted
- 29% lost job/income
- 24% domestic violence

**Chart 8** represents the breakdown of all 9 reasons shared and the percentage of women who reported:

**Chart 8: Reasons for Homelessness**



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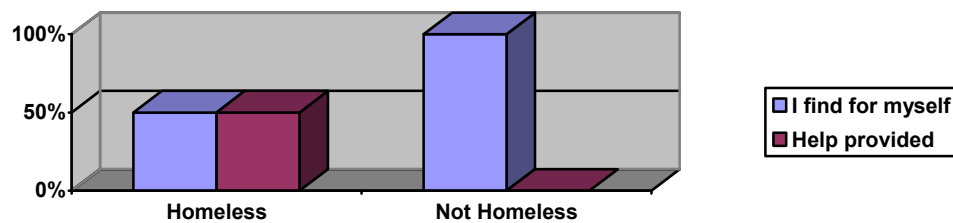


With an estimated 1% of the population of the United States experiencing homelessness each year, it is not surprising to see that victims of domestic violence, which include families with children, are included in the count. As indicated in **Chart 8**, 24% of the women interviewed by OFW shared a history of domestic violence; matching other studies that showed that one in four homeless women become homeless because of their experience with violence. Twenty-seven percent of all the children represented in this data set came from families with a history of domestic violence.

**How do you access the services that you need?**

The women we interviewed were asked how they accessed services, whether they sought them out for themselves or if they received some help finding services. More women in the “not homeless” category had to find the services they need on their own, without help, while the breakdown for those who were homeless was 50-50. See **Chart 9**.

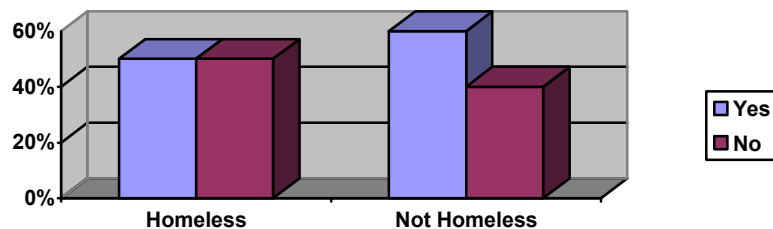
**Chart 9: How the Women Access Services**



**Have you experienced any problems accessing services?**

The homeless women were equal in reporting whether or not they experienced any problems accessing services while more “not homeless” women expressed frustration with accessing services as indicated in **Chart 10**.

**Chart 10: Problems Accessing Services**



The problems they experienced included:

- not knowing where to go
- case manager not helpful
- information booklet not up to date
- shelter sets goals for her to meet but does not make referrals
- told to go out and find a job

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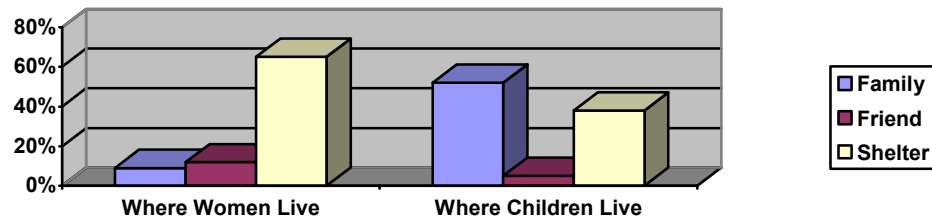
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Having access to resources is related to being connected to a support network – informal (family or friends) or formal (shelters). Where a homeless woman lives may influence the level of success she experiences accessing needed resources, particularly if that network is the formal shelter system.

**Chart 11** represents the percentage of women and children and where they live.

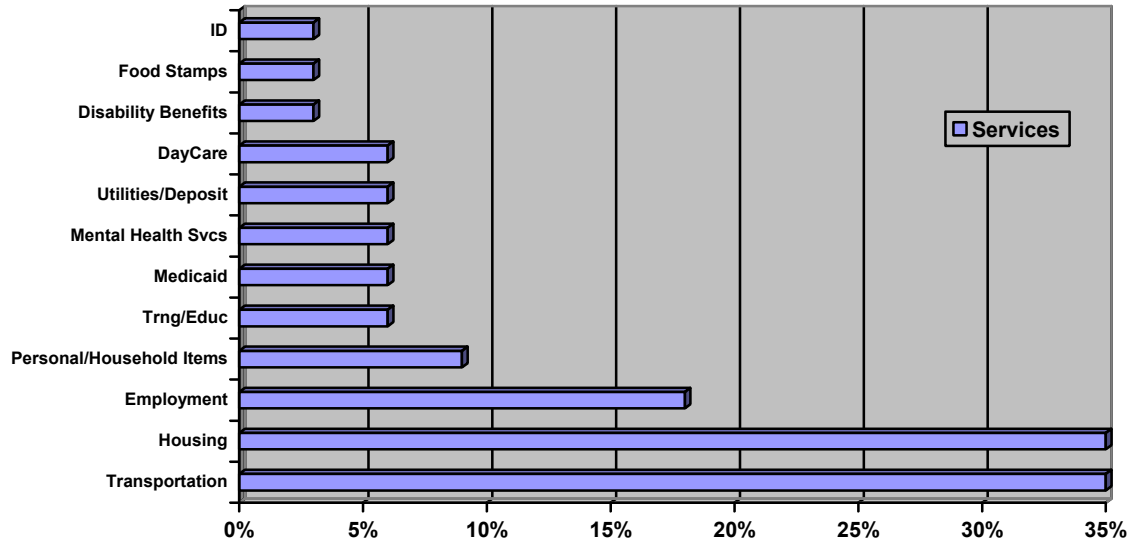
**Chart 11: Sources of Support**



**What needs do you have that are not being met?**

This was another open-ended question and the answers received identified eleven separate needs. Surprisingly, only 38% of the women identified multiple needs. As shown in **Chart 12**, transportation and housing were the services most often mentioned. Those who mentioned transportation shared that they were either limited by the bus line itself in finding employment or could not afford bus fare.

**Chart 12: Services Needed or Waiting On**



**Other Comments:**

- Opportunities are shrinking
- Need a women's shelter without men (instead of sharing dining room or other facilities)
- There are more and more people becoming homeless
- Looking forward to the day I put my own key in a door
- An environment without men would help women
- Louisville is very good at helping and providing resources

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- Hard to adjust from living on the street for 6 years
- Researched area before moving here

**Where they came from**

As part of the conversation, 18% of the women interviewed shared with us that they came from another community.

- Russellville, Kentucky
- Arizona
- Michigan
- Richmond, Virginia
- Elizabeth, Indiana
- Shepherdsville, Kentucky

**Coalition for the Homeless Data**

To get a more complete picture of the women who participated in Project Homeless Connect, here is a comparison, where provided/collected, between the OFW data and the Coalition's data sets:

	<b>Coalition General- Homeless (N=523)</b>	<b>Coalition Women- Homeless (n=80)</b>	<b>Coalition Women-Not Homeless (n=53)</b>	<b>OFW Women- Interviews (n=34)</b>
<b>Chronically Homeless</b>	54%	45%	34%	?
<b>Living in Emergency Shelter</b>	50%	?	0%	29%
<b>Veteran</b>	28%	5%	7%	?
<b>Minor Children</b>	?	?	61%	62%
<b>Largest Age Grp (40-49)</b>	38%	35%	37%	?
<b>No Financial Resources</b>	49%	44%	14%	?
<b>One or more Disabilities</b>	80%	?	65%	65%
<b>Victim of Domestic Violence<sup>6</sup></b>	?	?	45%	24%

**Conclusion**

Although over 130 women sought services during the Project Homeless Connect event, the OFW was able to interview only 34 women or 26%. With such a small sample, the results reported here cannot be generalized to all homeless women but there is value in gaining a better understanding of the frustrations and barriers homeless women in our community face. The value of the findings from our questionnaire is that it helped to provide insight into the sources of stress in their lives and how they access services. Highlights of those findings follows:

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<sup>6</sup> In 2005, half of the cities surveyed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors identified domestic violence as a primary cause of homelessness.

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**Mothers and their Children:**

- 75% of the homeless women had children under 18.
- The average number of children per mother was 2.9.
- 21% indicated that their children were grown and staying elsewhere.
- 56% of homeless mothers were separated from their children.
- 38% of the children were living with their mothers in shelters.
- 61% of the women were living in emergency or transitional shelters.
- 92% of the women had been in their current living situation 6 months or less.
- 79% of homeless women felt safer in their living situation compared to the 43% who were living in more permanent situations.
- The top four reasons for homelessness reported were:
  - 44% substance abuse
  - 35% lost home/evicted
  - 29% lost job/income
  - 24% domestic violence
- 27% of all the children came from families with a history of domestic violence.
- More women in permanent living situations reported having the most difficulty accessing services.
- 38% of the women identified multiple needs.
- 18% of the women came from another community.

**Other Things to Consider**

**Women and Homelessness:**

Research tells us that children account for more than a third of the homeless population and that families headed by single mothers are the fastest growing group. The number of women seeking services at Project Homeless Connect who were considered homeless represented 15% of the homeless who were served. The percent of women among the homeless is estimated to be 25% (single no dependents) and an unknown number among the 25% of the homeless who are members of a family. Seventy-five percent of the women served at the event had minor children. Therefore, it appears that homeless women, particularly single women without dependents were significantly underserved during Project Homeless Connect.

Without more information it is not possible to say whether homeless women are receiving services through some other venue, or if they are not being reached. Because 75% percent of the total number of clients who filled out intake forms was considered homeless, we know that 25% of those served were not considered homeless and therefore were not the group.

**Domestic Violence:**

Domestic violence is a primary cause of homelessness for many women. Research studies reveal that domestic violence is one of the most frequently stated causes of homelessness for families, with 13% of homeless families saying that they had left their last place of residence because of abuse or

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violence in the household. Another study showed that one in four homeless women is homeless because of her experience with violence. That statistic bears out from the interviews conducted by the OFW during Project Homeless Connect with 24% of the women shared that domestic violence was one of the reasons for their homelessness.

**Family Separation:**

Another research finding that is replicated in the OFW data is the fact that a significant percentage of homeless families experience the temporary or permanent separation of a child. Nationally, one in three homeless children are separated from their parents.<sup>7</sup> That number was significantly higher in our interviews, with 56% of the children not living with their mothers.

For those children who stay with the mother, homelessness can have a detrimental short-term impact, functioning as a “marker of risk” indicating that they are likely to have a higher prevalence rate of problems than similar general population youths, but not necessarily higher against a comparison of similarly poor, but housed children.<sup>8</sup>

**Plans for 2009**

The goal for Office for Women in participating in this event was to better understand the barriers and frustrations homeless women in our community face. We can count this as a successful endeavor having learned first hand that our homeless women have 2 or more minor children, with many living separately from them; have a history of domestic violence and substance abuse; and receive inadequate assistance in accessing services, particularly related to transportation, housing and employment.

Next year, we plan to be there again to talk with the women who participate about their education levels, employment status, hopes for themselves and their children. In addition, we will be visiting homeless shelters that provide services for women throughout the year – strengthening our relationship with the service providers and learning more about the programs and services they offer. Improving our understanding will help us to be better advocates as we work to improve the status of all women in our community.

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<sup>7</sup> The Committee on Temporary Shelter.

<sup>8</sup> Homeless Families and Children, 2007; Rog and Buckner